

## “Like Me” Jonah Series / 8: “Doing Justice, Preaching Wrath”

March 29, 2020

**Texts:** Jonah 3, 2 Peter 3.9

**Key Words:** Do over, Second chance, Believe in God, Believe God, Repent, Fasting, Trust, Grace

**Summary:** Jonah 3 begins Jonah’s “do-over.” He warns to repent or die, and for some reason, they repent. The story shows God’s grace for even the worst of the worst.

### **PART 1:**

Hey guys! Glad you’re with us this morning. Worshipping together on the first day of the week is what we Jesus followers do, even in a weird time like this .... And for a few weeks at least, this online worship is the best we can do. But remember, worship isn’t something you watch, it’s something you do. It’s up to you to turn this into a worship service! So, go ahead and check in if you want, let us know who you are and where you’re watching from. And then in a few minutes, let’s focus on what God’s Holy Spirit has to say to us today.

But first let’s kind of relax and have some fun. I’ve picked out a few of the better memes I have seen this week. Are you ready?

- Here’s Chuck Norris. Apparently Chuck Norris has been exposed to the Coronavirus. The virus is now in quarantine for 14 days. *(That’s humor sign)*
- And I know some of you guys are starting to prepare your gardens. Here’s a suggestion for you: Charmin Farmin. Just sprouted, ready in 3 weeks! *(That’s humor sign)*
- Now, let’s bring it back to church. We’re having to modify the way we do things. Ready: “When your church is closed due to the CoronaVirus but you’ve got people to baptize.” That’s called “social distancing.” Just humor, guys. We never close our baptistery. If you need it done, we’ll get it done.
- Two more: If you didn’t have a chance to drop by the church this last week to pick up communion supplies, we’ve got you covered. “Churches Switch to Remote Drone Delivery for Communion.” We’ve got some guys eager to give it a try. Seriously, we leave the church open during the day and you can come by to pray, or to pick up some communion supplies to take home.
- Last one – this one is kind of funny, and absolutely true. Ready? “God to ignore quarantine and continue being everywhere.” You can’t read the caption but here’s what it says. “The CDC now recommends for everyone to stay home and avoid going out as much as possible. Despite this, reports are that God is breaking quarantine and going absolutely everywhere.” How cool is that!

Okay, let’s bear down now and focus on the Word. Let me catch you up with where we are in this Jonah series. The story opens up like this: “The Lord gave this message to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are. But Jonah got up and went in the opposite direction to get away from the Lord.’” (Jonah 1.1-3)

And the first 2 chapters of this little book are about his running away. You see, even though Jonah is a prophet of God, he hates this assignment from God ... because he hates Nineveh more than he loves God.

- So instead of going east towards Nineveh, he jumps on a boat heading west.
- So God sends this crazy storm that threatens to swamp the boat unless Jonah gets off ... in the middle of the sea.

- So finally, reluctantly, the sailors give Jonah a hand – getting off the boat (they toss him overboard), where Jonah gets swallowed by this fish – sent by God.
- And somehow, inside the fish, Jonah decides he'd probably be better off doing things God's way.
- So the fish spits Jonah out, and that's where we are in the story. Ready? Here's what happens next.

“Then the Lord spoke to Jonah a second time: ‘Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh, and deliver the message I have given you.’” Sound familiar? Almost the exact same words. But “This time Jonah obeyed the Lord’s command.” (Jonah 3.1-3) In other words, God gives Jonah a do-over.

Which is so cool! We have a God who is amazing with “do-overs,” “second chances,” “restarts.” He has given me a boatload of them ... thank God! He's given you a boatload of them! And maybe, in the middle of this “crisis,” he's giving us another one. I didn't say God sent the virus – I think that's absurd. But God never wastes a hurt. He uses them to help us reset our priorities. He uses them to give us clarity on things like this: we are not invincible; we are not in control of nearly as much as we think we are; we need God; and our God is incredibly good. He'll give you a second chance, guys – right here, right now.

## **PART 2:**

Are you ready? Let's dig into the Word together. And listen for the Spirit's nudges. So, this part of the story is Jonah's “Do-over.” Which, by the way, starts out way better than take one, but ends up badly. But the bad part is next week. Here it is, “The Jonah Story: Take Two.” “Then the Lord spoke to Jonah a second time: ‘Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh, and deliver the message I have given you.’ This time Jonah obeyed the Lord’s command and went to Nineveh, a city so large that it took three days to see it all.” (Jonah 3.1-3)

A couple of notes, guys.

- First, you've got to see how much God cared about this terrible city. Which is flat out wrong to Jonah, and weird to some of us. The Ninevites were cruel, and evil, and pagan, and a threat to the very existence of Israel. They deserved hell, not grace. And God loves them anyway!
- Second, you've got to see how daunting this assignment was for Jonah. Not only was Nineveh flat out evil, it was flat out huge – a city so large it took 3 days to go through it, or three days to see it all. So, let's say you grew up in Frankfurt, and God sends you preach in New York City. Only this New York City is more like Teheran, and there's a good chance they'll literally cut out your tongue, before they skin you alive. This was scary!

And Jonah's like, “Okay! I guess it beats living inside a fish.” And it says, “On the day Jonah entered the city, he shouted to the crowds: “Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!” (Jonah 3.4) You've got 40 days ... and Nineveh will be ... literally, “turned.” You see, this Jonah story wasn't written in English, it was written in ancient Hebrew. But Hebrews words were kind of like English words, a single word could mean different things. You know, you look up a word in a Dictionary and it gives you 2, 3, 4 different options. Well if you look up this word in a Hebrew Dictionary it can mean “turned over,” or destroyed; or it can mean “turned around,” or changed, transformed. And I think here it can kind of mean either one: “In 40 days, you're either going to change, or God's going to destroy you. Your call!” “You've got 40 days to make up your mind. God's not going to let you continue down this path. So, repent, or die.”

Now understand, God doesn't want to destroy them. If he'd wanted to destroy them, he would have just done it. There would be no need for a Jonah. The apostle Peter put it like this. He says, "God does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent," to turn around, to change. (2 Peter 3.9) But still, at some point God is going to say, "Enough!" Eventually God is going to make things right. But so God wants you to make things right with him, before he has to deal with evil once and for all. Jonah says, "You guys have 40 days to repent, or die." And Jonah wasn't blowing air like a lot of sensationalist preachers out there; he was a prophet of God, speaking directly from God.

Now for some weird reason, "The people of Nineveh believed God's message." (Jonah 3.5) Why, I don't know. Why they believed this street preacher from the sticks, actually from one of the peoples under their thumb, I don't know. Why they believed Jonah's threats from a God who seemed way punier than one of their own gods, I don't know. You see, back then they figured the more powerful the city, the more powerful their God. In fact, a whole lot of people today still buy that nonsense. And yet, for some reason, instead of yanking out his tongue or skinning Jonah alive and nailing his skin to the city wall ... "The people of Nineveh believed God's message." ... Wow!

And you have to ask ... "Why?" Why did they believe God's message, this message from "Yahweh," the God of Israel? Well, there were some things going on in their world kind of like some of the things going on in our world. There were things going on that made them a bit more receptive to God.

- The Ninevites – the Assyrians – were building an empire – through violence, and cruelty, and terror. And when you try to rule through violence and terror, eventually people are going to fight back. So all over the edges of their "empire" people were fighting back. And here's the deal, the bully may be the biggest and strongest kid on the block, but if enough of the littler kids push back at the same time, they might knock the bully down. And people were pushing back
- And, there was unrest at home. Because when you are violent, and cruel towards outsiders, chances are you're going to be violent and cruel at home, too. And they were. And people were hurting each other, and using each other, blowing each other off. Unrest, riots, revolts ... Scary times for these scary people.
- But there was still more. There were these signs. These were a superstitious people, and there were these signs. We have historical records of two famines right about this time. Empty shelves at Kroger and Walmart. No toilet paper anywhere. People were scared. We also have historical evidence of a plague about that time. And they didn't have the medical resources that we have today, so their plagues were ever scarier. Unrest abroad, unrest at home, famines, plagues ... do you think the people were scared?
- And then there was a complete solar eclipse. And again, they didn't understand astronomy like we do. And it scared the bejeegers out of them.

And along comes this strange prophet who says, "In 40 days you will either be destroyed, by God, or you're going to shape up." But there is one more piece you just can't discount. There is this ... this thing ... called the Holy Spirit. And as part of God he is everywhere. And part of his mission on earth is to convict us of sin, and to convict us about God, and God's truth. And God's Holy Spirit is really good at his job! You've felt him. He's nudged you. He doesn't force himself on us ... yet. But you have felt his nudges, and his convictions. Well, Jonah is out there preaching, "You've got 40 days to repent or die." And the Holy Spirit is kind of working on the inside – "You need to listen! You really need to listen!"

And, it says, “They believed God.” Now I want to play with those words for just a moment. “They believed ... God.” It doesn’t say they believed “in God” – there is no evidence these Ninevites became followers of this Yahweh. It says they believed God. Which, in some respects, goes beyond just believing “in God.” You see, a whole lot of people today believe “in God,” but it doesn’t change the way they live. They’re kind of like, “I believe in God, but I’ll only do things his way as long as I agree with him,” right? That’s even how a lot of Jesus followers try to do life with God. We’re kind of like, “I believe in God, I believe in Jesus, I just don’t want to change, much.” Well, Jonah says, “In 40 days you’re either going to turn around, or God’s going to turn you upside down; you’re either going to change, or God’s going to destroy you.” And the Ninevites believed God.

So, here’s what they did. This is incredible. Verse 5: “From the greatest to the least, they declared a fast (a fast) and put on burlap to show their sorrow.” In other words, put away your party clothes, and put away the popcorn and Twinkies. We have some praying to do. It says, “When the king of Nineveh heard what Jonah was saying, he stepped down from his throne and took off his royal robes. He dressed himself in burlap and sat on a heap of ashes.” Which is what they did back then to show their penitence for their sin, to humble themselves before God. “Then the king and his nobles sent this decree throughout the city: ‘No one, not even the animals from your herds and flocks, may eat or drink anything at all.’ That’s incredible! Not even your dogs, your cats, your cows can eat or drink! He says, “People and animals alike must wear garments of mourning, and everyone (everyone!) must pray earnestly to God. They must turn from their evil ways and stop all their violence. Who can tell? Perhaps even yet God will change his mind and hold back his fierce anger from destroying us.” (Jonah 3.5-9)

Now, we can learn a lot about repentance from these Ninevites. They didn’t go far enough – there is no evidence they became Yahweh followers. But we can still learn a lot about repentance from them. Here it is:

- They believed God. They actually believed him strongly enough they did something about it. Do you?
- They openly expressed their sorrow. Sackcloth, ashes, fasting. All of them, from the king on down. Have you ever really mourned your sin?
- They called on God – they prayed. Hard!
- They turned from their wickedness ... for a while.
- And they hoped for grace. And if you hope for grace from God, you will never, ever be disappointed.

So, where are you with God ... right now? Do you believe in God? I hope so; that’s a start. Do you believe God? Not just “in him,” do you believe God? Enough that you are willing to do life with him, for him, his way ... even when you don’t understand him yet. You see, believing God isn’t measured by those times we understand him, and agree with him. Believing God is measured by those times we don’t understand the why ... yet. But we trust him.

So listen,

- Do you not only believe in God, do you believe God?
- Do you understand that, even though the timeline is different – I mean, God hasn’t told us, “In 40 days you’re either going to turn around, or God’s going to destroy you” ... Even though the timeline is different, the stakes are the same. All of us will end up in one of two place – heaven or hell – and it will all depend on how we respond to Jesus.
- So have you confessed your sin to God? Have you asked him for grace? Guys, God has only one answer when we ask him for his grace in Jesus – Absolutely!

- And they have you been willing to trust in his grace. Because that's when we start to experience the peace, and the joy, and the hope, and the courage a lot of people are needing right now.

Now, there's one more little piece, and it's kind of sobering. About 40 years later these Ninevites – at least their children, and their grandchildren – these Ninevites swept down from the north and crushed Israel, with the same kind of cruelty, and violence, and terror their parents repented of ... for a time.

It's scary how that works. We have a "come to Jesus" moment, and after a few days, or weeks, or months, or years ... we're back to the same old. Which is why repentance isn't something we do just once. It has to be repeated; it has to become part of the rhythm of our life. That's partly why we come together for worship on the first day of every week, for another moment of repentance, and another dose of grace. It's why we take the Lord's Supper every week, with another opportunity to repent, and another taste of grace.

Because decisions we make tend to fade over time. And decisions we make in times of fear often fade fast when the fear goes away. So repentance is something we do over and over again. And it's something we teach our children, and our grandchildren. So let's humble ourselves before our God together, right now.

### **PART 3:**

Before we go, there's one more challenge I have for you guys. The Ninevites called for a time of fasting and prayer. Maybe we should too. Now I know, this Coronavirus is not some thunderbolt from God punishing us for our sins. It's a virus sickening those who follow God with the same kind of venom as it sickens those who don't.

But still, throughout history, we Jesus followers have prayed and fasted during really difficult times. And this is a really difficult time. So I am challenging the Capital City Family to a fast on Wednesday evening this week. If Wednesday isn't good for you for some reason, pick another time. But I am challenging you to skip your evening meal – if you can, and instead spend some serious time in prayer.

Pray for your family; pray for your friends. Pray for your church family, and the other churches in our town. Pray for our community; our country ... our leaders. Pray for those in other nations less fortunate and less prepared than we are. Get honest with God. And get quiet with God. Put yourself in a place where you are receptive to his whispers, and his nudges. And one more thing – give thanks. No matter how messy things are, we are a blessed people, with an amazing God. Give thanks!